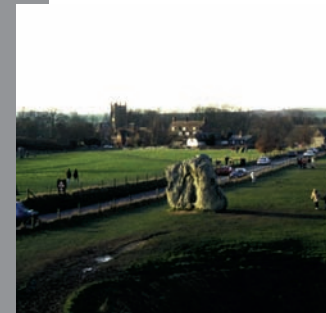
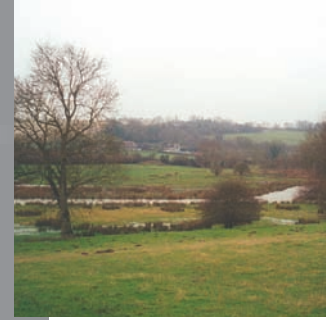


# North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Integrated Landscape Character Assessment

Technical Report



**NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB**

**INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE  
CHARACTER ASSESSMENT  
TECHNICAL REPORT**

**Prepared for The Countryside  
Agency  
by  
Land Use Consultants**

**March 2002**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The study has been steered by an Advisory Group with the following members:

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Will Harley	Kennet District Council
Charlotte Riggs	Swindon Borough Council
Linda Tartaglia-Kershaw	Hampshire County Council
Paul Smith	Oxfordshire County Council
Bill Scott	Thames Valley Enterprise Ltd

Photographs have been provided by Ann Seth.

The study has involved consultation and gathering of existing data and information and we appreciate the time and involvement of many individuals and organisations. Details of those contacted are provided in Appendix 1. We have also drawn upon information collected as part of a wide ranging consultation exercise conducted as part of a recent study to investigate a proposed management structure for the North Wessex Downs AONB (Countryside Agency 2000). This included consultations with all the local authorities (11), statutory agencies, the farming and land management community including CLA, NFU and representatives of the main estates, key conservation agencies, local interest groups and recreation groups. In addition the draft technical report and a separate issues report were issued to 54 and 75 consultees respectively. A full list of consultees is provided in Appendix 5. This consultation has formed an important part of the characterisation process and provided additional detail for the final chapters of this report.

A diverse range of detailed landscape character assessments exist for the component local authorities within the AONB. This study has sought to bring this information together within a consistent framework for the AONB. We have, in consequence, drawn heavily on the information contained in these assessments (Appendix 2).

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## **A Nationally Significant Landscape**

- 1.1. The North Wessex Downs is a landscape of national significance as recognised by its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It is one of thirty seven AONB's in England and Wales, and is considered to be of equivalent importance in terms of landscape quality as a National Park.
- 1.2. The North Wessex Downs was designated as an AONB in 1972, giving coherence to one of the most continuous tracts of chalk downland in England. It covers 1,730 sq km and is one of England's largest AONBs. From its western tip at Calne in Wiltshire, it stretches across the South West and South East of England in a broad arc through Swindon, Berkshire and Oxfordshire, adjoining the Chilterns AONB along the River Thames before sweeping south, encircling Newbury, to encompass the northern reaches of the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs. It then continues towards Devizes across the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low lying Vale of Pewsey. The extent and location of the AONB is illustrated in Figure 1.
- 1.3. The underlying chalk geology is the uniting theme of the North Wessex Downs and has had a profound effect on hydrology, biodiversity, patterns of land use and settlement. The chalklands are etched with the impact of human use over the millennia and the archaeology of the AONB is immensely rich, with many of its monuments ranking among the most impressive in Europe and including the World Heritage Site at Avebury. The AONB is sparsely populated (125,000), with the settlement largely located within the river valleys. This concentration of habitation has left intervening open uninhabited downlands. Thus 'pools of tranquillity' with a strong sense of remoteness are an important feature of the AONB - a very special perceptual characteristic within the densely populated part of Southern England.
- 1.4. The North Wessex Downs is a landscape of great diversity with significant variation and contrast. The AONB includes parts of five Character Areas as shown on the joint Character of England Map published by the Countryside Agency and English Nature: 130 Hampshire Downs, 132 Salisbury Plain and the West Wiltshire Downs, 116 Berkshire and Marlborough Downs, 129 Thames Basin Heaths and 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales (small part). The landscape varies from the high open arable sweeps of the Marlborough Downs with their characteristic beech-top knolls and incised by narrow sheltered chalk river valleys, to the more intimate well-wooded areas, as in the area around Chute Forest and Savernake Forest. In the eastern part of the AONB the land is lower, overlying Thames Basin gravels and London Clay with a characteristic rich mosaic of woodland, pasture, heath and common land.

## **The Need for a Landscape Character Assessment**

- 1.5. The Countryside Agency publishes detailed assessments for all of England's AONBs - the North Wessex Downs is the last remaining AONB to be studied. This assessment is timely, being produced when the profile is being raised of AONBs through the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000* and a wide range of other initiatives, including an increase in public funding available for AONB

management. The new policy framework provides an important opportunity to guide and shape the future character of the North Wessex Downs.

- **CROW Act:** The status of AONBs has recently been strengthened through measures introduced in the *Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000*, which provide greater support for their planning and management. These measures include a new duty on public bodies to 'have regard' to the need to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of AONB landscapes when carrying out their statutory functions. The Act also requires all AONBs to have management plans produced, published and regularly revised by their local authorities. By identifying the character of the AONB and its main pressures and sensitivities, this landscape character assessment is a fundamental part of the process towards future production of a management plan.
- **Understanding Management Needs:** The landscape of the North Wessex Downs AONB is at a critical juncture and is on the threshold of significant change. Future restructuring within agriculture may have a dramatic impact on landscape character. At the same time the rapid growth of peripheral urban areas, based on the information and communications technology industries, brings a further range of pressures and opportunities. For these reasons an objective assessment is important to understand what is important about the landscape, to identify its special qualities and why they are valued. The real challenge for the future will be to manage and guide the change in a way that reinforces the diverse landscape character and the special perceptual characteristics of the North Wessex Downs. This landscape assessment should contribute to a better understanding of the importance and diversity of the landscape and help establish the unique identity and qualities of the area. In so doing, it should provide a strong framework for its holistic management, to be taken forward through the AONB Management Plan.
- **The North Wessex Downs Management Structure:** The Countryside Agency, with support of the local authorities and a wide partnership of statutory bodies, NGOs and local people is establishing an appropriate management structure for the North Wessex Downs AONB. The management structure will provide a mechanism to bring forward action to address the issues identified in the landscape character assessment.

- 1.6. **A Coherent Approach:** The assessment takes a comprehensive and coherent approach to the characterisation of the AONB landscape. The North Wessex Downs AONB includes parts of three county councils, two unitary authorities and six district/borough authorities.

Unitary Authorities	County Councils	District/Borough Authorities
West Berkshire District Council	Hampshire C.C.	Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council Test Valley Borough Council
Swindon Borough Council	Oxfordshire C.C.	Vale of White Horse District Council South Oxfordshire District Council
	Wiltshire C.C.	Kennet District Council North Wiltshire District Council

- 1.7. A large number of local authorities have undertaken independent assessments (see Appendix 2) of their areas and taken together, these assessments cover the entirety of the AONB, although they differ in approach, method and level of detail. This reinforces the need for a consistent and comprehensive character assessment focussed on the AONB, which fits within the national framework provided by the Character of England map and the emerging national landscape typology. It also builds on the local authority scale assessments to develop an overarching study for the AONB as a unified landscape area.
- 1.8. **Raising Awareness:** The AONB is split, on an administrative basis, between the South East and the South West Regions of England which means that it is divided between two Government Offices and at least two regional offices of all the statutory agencies. As a single entity, the AONB does not have a strong public resonance unlike the Chilterns or the Cotswolds and to many, appears to lack a sense of unity as a single discrete area. The preparation of this AONB assessment should help raise awareness of the AONB landscape as an entity among local people, visitors, the constituent local authorities, regional government and the statutory agencies that operate within the area.
- 1.9. This assessment aims to focus attention on the area and increase understanding of the issues and pressures that the AONB faces and its management requirements. It will guide and inform those responsible for developing policies for the AONB and will provide a framework for the future development of an AONB management plan.

## The Structure of this Report

- 1.10. This Technical Report presents the results of the range of studies that have investigated the physical, ecological, historical, social, economic and cultural, and recreational characteristics of the AONB. It is structured into three main parts, which follow the introduction and method statement.

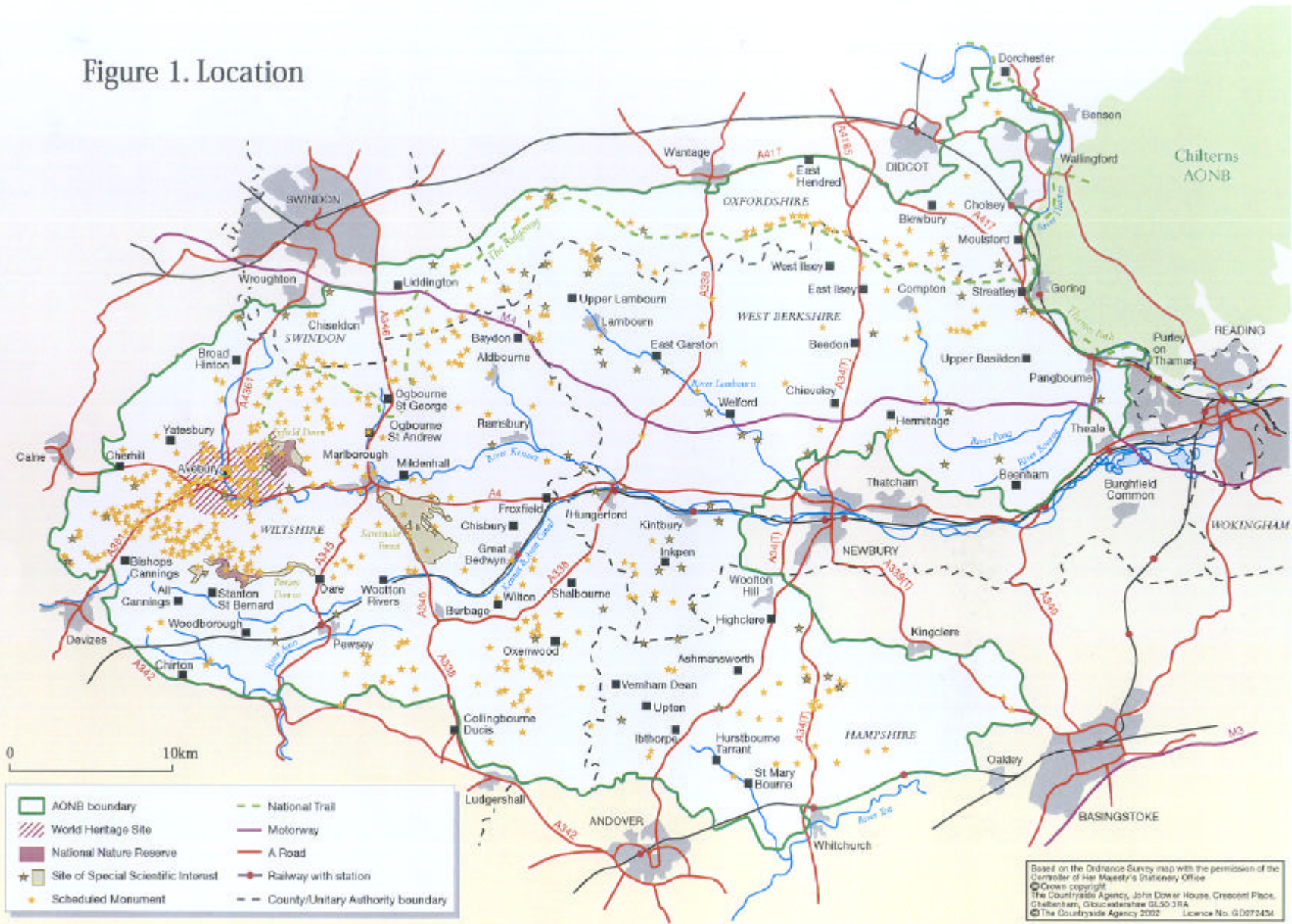
**Part 1: Overview:** Establishes the identity of the AONB as a whole and provides a summary of the main influences on contemporary landscape character. These include physical, cultural, ecological, social and economic characteristics. It also includes a review of perceptions of the AONB.

**Part 2: The Character of the North Wessex Downs AONB:** This is the main part of the report and contains the detailed character assessment, with descriptions of each of the integrated Landscape Types and their component Character Areas.

**Part 3: The Future:** The final section contains an overview of the principal forces for change set in the context of past changes. It looks at the key factors influencing the character of the North Wessex Downs, both positive change and issues that threaten the special qualities of the AONB. It concludes with some recommendations for future research.

- 1.11. The Technical Report provides the basis for a published report by the Countryside Agency 'The North Wessex Downs Landscape' (2002).

Figure 1. Location



## 2. METHOD STATEMENT

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- 2.1. The method for undertaking the landscape assessment follows the accepted method promoted by the Countryside Agency as set out in the document *"Interim Landscape Character Assessment Guidance 1999"*. The AONB-wide assessment has been prepared within the framework set by the Agency's Countryside Character Initiative as shown on the Character of England Map. It also fits within the context provided by the Agency's emerging National Landscape Typology.
- 2.2. The assessment builds upon the existing Local Authority assessments to develop a comprehensive and consistent characterisation for the AONB. The local authority assessments have attained a high degree of political and public acceptance within individual local authorities and many have been adopted as supplementary planning guidance or provide the basis for local plan policy. Some have been the subject of wide stakeholder involvement. It is therefore vital that they are integrated into the AONB assessment in a logical and consistent way, with the AONB-wide study providing the overarching framework for these more detailed studies. A detailed supplementary report on the analysis and integration of the existing assessments, showing how each of these relates to the AONB-wide classification has been prepared for the Countryside Agency.
- 2.3. This assessment seeks to present a fully integrated view of the landscape incorporating all the features and attributes that contribute to the special and distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs AONB. These include the physical, ecological, visual, historic and cultural forces that have shaped the present day landscape. It also recognises the AONB today as a living and working landscape and considers the social, economic and recreational characteristics that contribute to its current character.
- 2.4. This chapter provides a summary method statement and illustrates how the diverse aspects of the study have been integrated. A fuller method statement for each of the component studies is provided in Appendix 1.
- 2.5. The process for undertaking the study and the integration of the specialist studies is illustrated in a process diagram (overleaf). In summary, this involved five main stages, namely:
  - Data Collation;
  - Characterisation;
  - Survey;
  - Integration and Analysis;
  - Consultation.

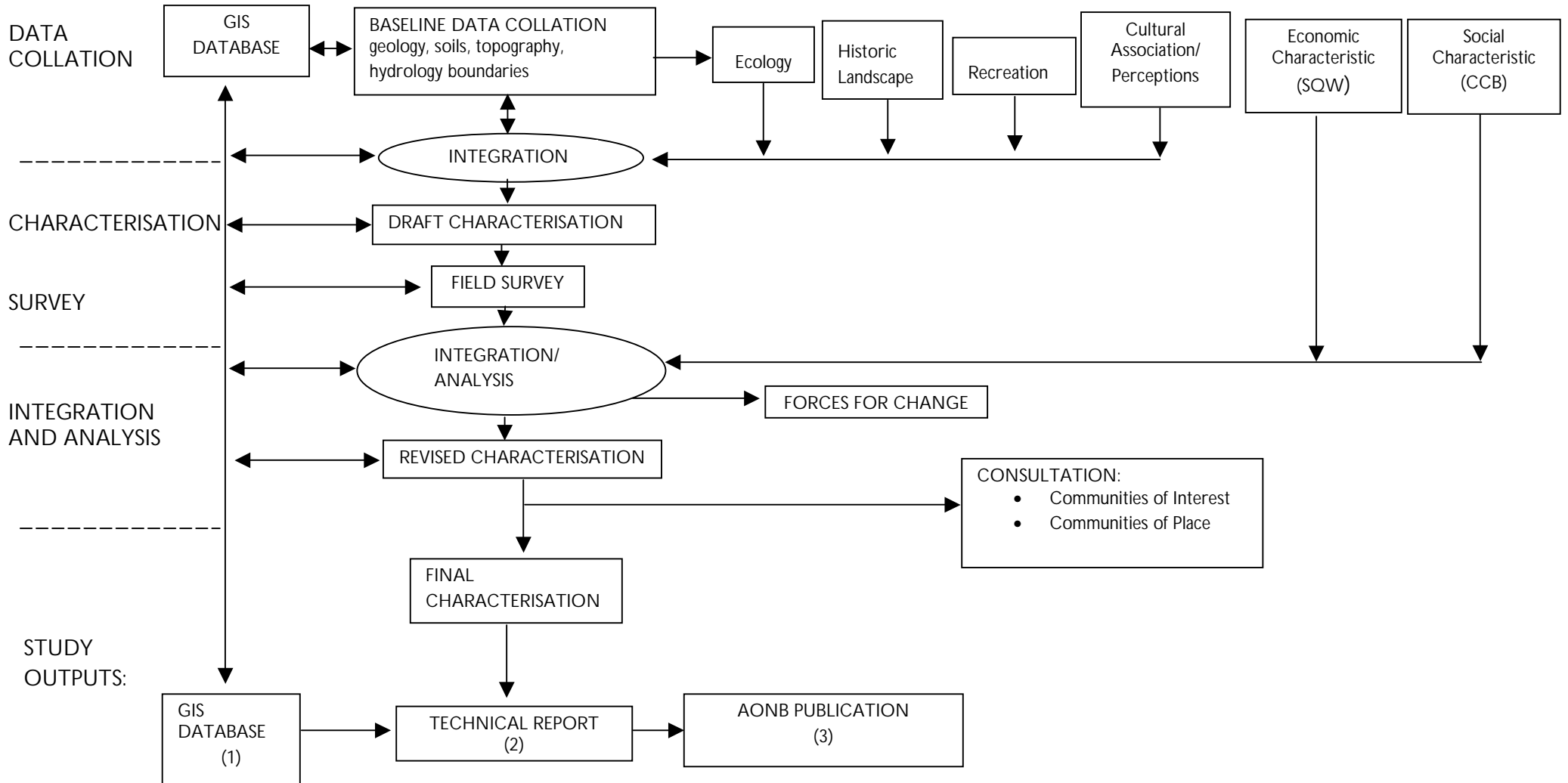


NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT:

STUDY PROCESS

SPECIALIST STUDIES



- 2.6. Each of these stages is described below. Throughout the study GIS was used as the tool for collating, manipulating and presenting data. It is anticipated that the GIS database developed as part of the study will provide an important tool for future management of the North Wessex Downs.

## Data Collation

- 2.7. **Baseline Data:** This stage involved the collation and mapping of a wide range of existing information on the characteristics of the North Wessex Downs from sources including baseline maps of geology, topography, soils and drainage.
- 2.8. Information gathering through a series of structured telephone interviews with key individuals within statutory agencies, local authorities and other organisations was also undertaken. Details of key sources of information and consultees for each of the specialist studies on ecology, the historic landscape, recreation, economic and social characteristics are provided in Appendix 1.
- 2.9. **National Context:** As part of this initial stage the context provided by the framework of the five joint Character Areas and the emerging national Landscape Typology was reviewed and boundaries mapped to place the AONB in context within this national hierarchy.
- 2.10. **Local Context:** Almost the entirety of the North Wessex Downs is covered by local authority assessments. Each of these assessments was reviewed and its boundaries mapped. At the same time a detailed analysis of the key characteristics of each landscape type and character area described within these assessments was undertaken. This analysis provided the building blocks for developing a consistent AONB-wide classification.

## Characterisation

- 2.11. The process of characterisation drew together all the information outlined above, to develop a draft classification for the AONB. The approach follows best practice as promoted by the Countryside Agency in the *Interim Landscape Character Assessment Guidance 1999* in maintaining a clear distinction between landscape types and character areas, and developing a hierarchical approach as follows:
- **Landscape Character Types** - which are generic and share common combinations of geology, topography, vegetation and human influences, e.g. Open Downland or River Valleys;
  - **Character Areas** - which are single and unique, discrete geographical areas of the landscape type, e.g. Marlborough Downs or Kennet Valley.
- 2.12. The classification was informed by the ongoing specialist studies, particularly in the case of the historic environment. It is, however, important to note that the approach does not involve a range of separate characterisations of the historic landscape, recreation attributes and socio-economic data. The emphasis throughout has been on the integration of these diverse studies within the overall framework established by the landscape character assessment.
- 2.13. The draft characterisation of the North Wessex Downs AONB was presented and discussed by the steering group. This consultation process resulted in some further

refinement of the classification and fine tuning of boundaries to reflect local circumstances. The final classification encompasses eight landscape types, each with a set of component character areas.

## Field Survey

- 2.14. A field survey was undertaken. This was specifically focussed on:
- refining boundaries and ensuring a consistent approach across the AONB for example in the definition of the scarp and river valleys;
  - fine tuning the classification particularly of the 'lowland' areas of the AONB falling within national Character Area 108 Thames Basin Heaths;
  - recording landscape character in a consistent manner to reinforce information within the existing assessments;
  - assessing condition, key trends and forces for change.
- 2.15. A systematic and rigorous approach was adopted for the survey, with information recorded on 1:25,000 scale maps and on a Field Record Sheet (Appendix 3).

## Integration and Analysis

- 2.16. A process of integration and analysis followed the field survey. In particular emphasis was placed on the assimilation and synthesis of information from the specialist studies and using this to develop integrated descriptions of the North Wessex Downs and its component landscape types and character areas.
- 2.17. The table below shows how the information has been integrated within the report structure.

Specialist Study	AONB-WIDE	Landscape Types	Character Area
Ecology	✓	✓	✓
Historic Environment	✓	✓	✓
Recreation		✓	✓
Economic Character	✓		
Social Character	✓	✓ & Appendix 4	
Perceptions	✓	✓	

- 2.18. The AONB-wide information is presented in the first part of the report providing an overview of its character. For the **economic study**, although it was possible to draw a very broad distinction between the agricultural dominated core areas and the more settled border areas, it was difficult to break this down to a landscape type level. This is principally because the AONB cannot be considered in isolation and the whole area is linked with and strongly influenced by the surrounding economies of Swindon, Newbury, Reading, Andover, etc. and particularly in the eastern part by

its proximity to London. Using parish data it has been possible to consider **social/community** characteristics (population and services) at a more detailed level and provide a broad indication of the variation within each landscape type.

- 2.19. In preparing the detailed character area descriptions the emphasis has been on integrating information from all the diverse aspects of the study.

## Consultation

- 2.20. The final stage of the study, involved consultation with a range of local stakeholders involving both communities of interest and communities of place. Two reports were circulated for consultation and a full list of Consultees appears in Appendix 5.
- 2.21. A consultation draft of the **technical report** was circulated to 54 consultees, including all the constituent local authorities, statutory agencies (English Nature, The Forestry Commission, English Heritage, Environment Agency, SEEDA, SWERDA, MAFF, main NGO's and key interests (the Wildlife Trust, Avebury WHS, National Trusts, RSPB) representatives of farming interests including the NFU and CLA, recreation and tourism interests and selected representatives of the community, including members of the Downlands Conference Steering Group (an informal AONB interest group and forerunner to the AONB management structure established in 2001).
- 2.22. A separate **short issues report** based on the 'Forces for Change' (Chapter 16) ' of the technical report was circulated to 75 consultees, involving individuals and organisations known to have an interest in the future of the North Wessex Downs. These were selected in conjunction with the Countryside Agency and included key contacts from the Downlands Conference.
- 2.23. Following receipt of comments two short reports summarising the main results of the consultation were circulated to the steering group for discussion. These reports included comments on boundary changes to reflect local perceptions, addition of detail and nuance to the descriptions, notes of management issues and recommendations for further work to be undertaken as part of the future AONB Management Plan.
- 2.24. The results of the consultation exercise are reflected in this report. Copies of all comments received have been passed to the Countryside Agency.